

Underground movement

‘So how come you're here, then?’

Penwright looked to the left and the right along the sewer. His eyes, long accustomed to the dim light of the low wattage lamps dotted along the wall, confirmed that he was the only person there. Nevertheless, a question had been asked and it stood to reason that there was somebody at the other end of it. He shook his head, preferring not to consider the possibility that a voice had become detached from its owner. He allowed his attention to drift back to the lone rat that he had been studying as it endeavoured to feed on the mossy wall opposite. It now seemed to be eyeing him with a look of something resembling pity, much as one would regard a child falling from its first bicycle.

‘Not very conversational, are you?’

Penwright shook his head again, more violently this time. If he had not known better, he would have sworn that the rat had spoken. Maybe the faint gases that issued from the murky brook below had got into his blood and affected his mind. No. He was completely in charge of his thoughts and could think or say what he wished.

‘Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.’ Yes, he had said that of his own volition. ‘The square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides.’

There, nothing wrong with either of those two statements.

‘E equals mc squared.’

Penwright glowered at the rat. ‘I could have sworn you spoke.’

‘Bloody marvelous! I wondered when you'd twig on.’

Penwright put his hands over his eyes and leaned heavily against the wall behind him. ‘Good Lord, maybe I am going mad.’

This was not supposed to happen. His first impulse was to get out of the sewer but he was held back by the sense of security it gave him. When he thought about the crowded archways and the shop doorways that only half stopped the elements; when he thought about the drug-ridden gangs that were always prowling, eager to relieve you of your last possessions, he knew where he was better off. Here in the sewer, he was safe and dry. The detergent water that regularly cascaded from the luxury hotels above him kept him reasonably warm and neutralised most of the smell. He must stay.

While he was giving these considerations a mental airing, the rat had run along the far ledge, scampered along a black-lagged pipe that bridged the sewer and was now squatting before him, its front paws neatly folded against its chest.

‘So how come you're here, then?’

This time, Penwright looked down to the source of the question, resigning himself to the fact that the rat had indeed spoken. He accepted that the voice, a boyish alto at close quarters, was

genuine. Not only that, he also detected character in those pointed, grey-whiskered features and understanding in those black eyes. He felt it was up to him to contribute to further conversation.

‘My compliments on your excellent English.’

The rat inclined its head slightly. ‘Thank you. It is nothing. We know most languages. We can perform rapid mental and verbal communication. What may sound like a squeak to you may contain as much information as a television documentary. By hiding close to where humankind gather, we can listen to their minds and voices. In a week, we can learn an entire language and most of its colloquial nuances.’

‘Amazing. The human race must have completely misjudged you all this time.’

‘Amazing also that when you ask a human a question, it’ll either answer a different question or answer with a question. I reckon that the guy who decided that modern man needed to be classified as a subspecies called Homo Sapiens Sapiens had to say Sapiens twice to convince himself.’

Penwright scowled at his new companion. ‘What do you mean by that?’

The rat held out his front paws and shrugged. ‘So how come you’re here, then?’

‘Well, it’s warm and dry and...’

‘No, no, no! What caused you to make the decision that it was appropriate for you to live in a sewer?’

‘Oh, that.’ Penwright paused to consider whether to give a detailed history or just the bare facts.

‘Just the bare facts’ll do.’

‘Right, I’ll - hey, how did you do that?’

The rat chuckled softly. ‘Ah, the mind reading. It’s easy, really. You see, when humans use their minds, they make minute, very rapid eye movements. The greater the stress, the bigger they eye movements.’

‘Ah, that could explain why people with guilty consciences have shifty eyes.’

‘You’re learning.’

‘And I’d better answer your question before you have to remind me again.’ Penwright sat forward and cupped his chin in his hands. He was glad to have someone to listen to his woes.

‘I was once a rich man, very rich. I stayed in the best hotels, including some of those in the avenues above us. I could sail to the sun when the City got cold, I could buy the best clothes, best cars, meet the best people.’

He chuckled ironically.

‘In fact, in those days, other people often went out of their way to meet me. It was a terrific lifestyle. It was thanks to my father, really. He left me a respectable fortune and I seemed to have the knack of choosing the most profitable investments.’

‘Oh, so you were a gambler?’

‘Not a gambler, an investor.’

‘Okay, a gambler with the odds engineered significantly in your favour.’

‘That's a bit unfair.’

‘Is it? Still, go on.’

Penwright recomposed himself. ‘Well, anyway, after building up a sizeable nest-egg, I got into insurance, placing sizable funds at the disposal of certain recommended underwriters. Almost immediately, there was a glut of disasters. I tried to switch to banking, only to see the bank I had selected go to the wall and its chairman arrested for fraud. In the end, I took a proper job.’

‘Ah, the human slave ethic. What job?’

‘I became an operations manager with a debt collection agency. It seemed like a good idea at the time, with the state of the economy.’

‘Then you were replaced by a computer.’

‘Well, no - or maybe in effect I was. How did you know?’

‘Educated guess. We know all about computers. We get far more reliable results by networking our minds.’

‘Networking? Good Lord! Can you actually do that?’

‘We certainly can. But go on.’

Penwright sighed heavily.

‘To put it into simple words, things just got worse until all my money was gone. I had never provided for such an emergency, so any benefits I could get were negligible.’

The rat was chuckling again.

‘My, what a complicated way of life you humans create for yourselves. Taxes, benefits, insurance, profit. Why don't you just look after each other in times of misfortune? Why so much greed?’

‘Self-preservation? Force of habit? I suppose I was brought up with certain values and never thought about life in any other light. I certainly know differently now. When things got really bad, I took to the streets and felt quite justified in stealing what I needed. A few months earlier, I would have considered such behaviour outrageous and clamoured for any such offender to be severely punished. I had put so much wealth in over the years, I felt I was entitled to take something out. Do you rats never feel that?’

‘Why should we? We think and act communally.’

‘Yes, but surely you are not immune to misfortune or downfall?’

The rat considered the question for a few moments then said: ‘Although we have adapted to various human constructions over the years, we are still burrowers by nature. Our living systems can be quite complicated, and this tends to deter predators. They get lost and we trap them. You humans are our greatest enemy: you even breed dogs and polecats to do your dirty work for you. All we need are food, security, shelter and somewhere to raise our young.’

The rat stroked his whiskers as if deep in thought.

‘If we can fulfil our needs, even in sewers, we are quite happy. If we hit a food shortage, our females control their fertility. If we upset the order of the human world by trying to achieve

these things, we have to adapt to the new order they impose. It invariably works, so why should we prejudice our well-being?’

‘And I thought man was intelligent.’ Penwright suddenly felt ashamed and downhearted. ‘Just think, there are millions in the world worse off than me and as soon as things went wrong, I indulged in self-pity and ran away. Maybe I deserve to be in a sewer.’

The rat stood up to its full height. ‘I can think of worse places!’

Penwright reached out and touched the creature's shoulder. ‘I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply - say, have you a name?’

‘They call me Summoner. It is an ancient name given to natural leaders.’

‘So where you lead, other rats follow?’

‘Well, yes, but I don't like to put it that way. I had a far ancestor in Germany who was double-crossed by...’

‘Oh, yes, I forgot about that.’

Summoner gave a dismissive wave. ‘We do not consider ourselves to be better than other rats. We just seem to possess the foresight and judgment to draw others into our meditations. Combine those massed minds with a rat's faculty for logic and you have quite a formidable force.’

Penwright's face took on a more serious aspect. ‘Summoner, could that logic put my life back in order? Your words have really made an impression on me.’

Summoner went into deep thought. Penwright had an overwhelming feeling that he was being judged.

‘You must do that by using your own logic.’ Summoner was watching him with considerable intensity. ‘All I can do is suggest certain ideas to enhance your logic. I must make demands in return, though.’

Penwright experienced a pang of confidence the like of which he had not known for a long time. ‘Ask what you will. Judging by what I have learned from you so far, it'll be a price worth paying.’

Again, Summoner gathered his thoughts. ‘Do you possess faith?’

‘When today started, I would have said no, but your words have rekindled it. I'm ready to listen.’

Summoner held Penwright's eyes with an almost hypnotic stare. ‘You must return to your own world. You must put your life into some sort of order: logic cannot progress without order. Have a little self-esteem and avoid the gutter existence. Now that you are aware of our ways, you must maintain faith in our abilities and let us help you. We cannot perform miracles, and neither can you. Step by step, you will learn how to persuade people to talk to rats. You will get them to release rats from cages and treat them as friends rather than pets.’

Summoner leaned forward until their faces almost touched.

‘Are you man enough, do you have faith enough, to carry this through?’

‘You have made me man enough, you have given me that faith.’

Summoner's whiskers quivered and Penwright felt a strange inner glow. It was as if great power and knowledge were flowing from Summoner to him. After what could have been five minutes or five hours, Summoner backed away and sat down, sighing heavily.

‘I am tired now. Go and prepare your objectives.’

The two of them sat for a moment, maintaining eye contact as if some great bond held them together.

‘In forty days’ time, there will be a full moon. At one hour after midnight, you must return here and report on your efforts. By then, we shall know if this great mutual trust has worked. Good Luck!’

With that, Summoner scampered across the pipe and, with a brief nod, disappeared into a ventilation shaft.

It was one o'clock on a rainy Sunday morning when Penwright returned to the alley between the two hotels. He put down his hold-all next to a manhole cover and removed the belt from his coat. Using the belt as a handle, he lifted the cover. He dropped onto the steps and pulled the hold-all in after him. Releasing his belt, he quietly moved the manhole cover back into position.

For a few moments, the faint pungency of the air got to his senses and disturbed his balance. With great care, he descended the steps until he was beside the main sewer. Once there, the unsteadiness subsided, and he opened his hold-all to release two white rats.

He walked to the site of his first encounter with Summoner. He sat down on the ledge and the two white rats scampered onto his lap. ‘Summoner!’

He could hear nothing, nor could he sense the old rat’s presence. ‘Summoner!’

Only the sound of trickling water reached his ears. He looked both ways along the sewer. He could detect no sign of any other creature.

‘Summoner!’

He wondered if that conversation with an unusual rat had been a dream. Had the trace gasses made him hallucinate? In his despair, had he seen and believed what he wished to see and believe?

‘Summoner!’

The rat had told him to keep faith. That made sense. It was all too deep and positive to be mere words in a dream. Thinking back, he knew that Summoner had talked more sense than anyone he had ever met. He could never have imagined such knowledge and philosophy. He looked left and right again, willing his friend to be there.

‘Summoner! It's me, Penwright! Don't muck me about like this! I have some good news!’

Summoner was not making an appearance. Penwright ran his fingers through his hair with a weary sigh. He picked up the two white rats and paced a twenty metre stretch along the drain's edge.

‘Summoner! This is the last time! If you don't come out now, I'm going! I have things to do! I have a life now!’

A sudden rush of steaming water from a nearby down-pipe was the only reply.

‘Summoner!’

The silence was almost like a challenge.

Penwright put down the two white rats and returned to his hold-all. Swinging it to his shoulder, he set off towards the steps leading to the manhole. He was disappointed but not dejected.

What a wonderful thing faith was. Had it not been for Summoner, he would never have sought work, nor would he have sought and found the modest accommodation that enabled him to return to a reasonably decent way of living. Most of all, he would not have met Janet, the lady from the pet shop who also spoke to rats and no longer kept them in cages.

He paused at the foot of the manhole steps and debated whether to give Summoner just one more call.

‘Penwright!’

He spun quickly and looked at the spot from where the voice had come.

‘Don't forget us!’

‘Alpha! Omega!’ He gathered up the two white rats and they scampered to his shoulders.

Omega nuzzled against his left ear. ‘Now you're really going to need us.’

Meanwhile, deep in a ventilation shaft, a grey-whiskered rat known as Summoner curled up and closed his eyes contentedly. He knew that the two young females who now called themselves Alpha and Omega were with their new guardian. With their help, Penwright would make those decisions which would bring him respect, influence and, eventually, renown.

‘Thank you, Alpha. Thank you, Omega.’ He sensed their immediate response. He was nearing the end of his life and had achieved things for his fellow rats in a quiet and thoughtful manner. Now he had initiated a revolution which would transform the lives of both rats and men. He had no regrets about not being there to see it because he knew that he could depend on Penwright. If that man had been aware of his faith during his downfall, he would never have got into the situation that had enabled the two to meet. Fate had funny ways at times.

‘Thank you, Penwright.’

Penwright returned to his own world a little sad that he had not seen Summoner. An aura of approval overwhelmed him which could only have originated from his underground friend. It pleased him, but he would have loved to have touched that bristly shoulder once again. In his own mind, he felt equipped, even ambitious to achieve the world that his mentor had envisaged.

He replaced the manhole cover and marched purposefully towards the alley entrance. As he turned the corner, three masked men jumped out of the shadows and brandished hunting knives.

‘Your wallet!’

He did not know which of them had made the gruff demand.

Penwright looked into the eyes of each one in turn. ‘Never! It's about time the evil of this world was sorted out properly and you three are evil. Throw down your knives and never let me see you again.’

The three closed in, hesitated, then stepped back again. They looked at the ground, at each other and at Penwright.

‘Okay, mister. We don't want any trouble.’

They threw down the knives, looked at Penwright again and then ran, a hundred or so brown rats in their wake.

‘Aren't you going to call them off?’ Omega asked.

Penwright smiled and stroked both white rats.

‘Soon, girls, soon.’